X F R S T N

"XFR STN": 3 FAQS

1 WHY "XFR STN"?

"XFR STN" began with a proposal to the New Museum from Alan W. Moore, who, in the spirit of his practice (Moore is a founding member of Colab), was looking for a partner. Described as an artistic project as well as a public service, "XFR STN" was conceived by Moore to address a specific context—some eight hundred videotapes in a storage bin in Staten Island, amassed during the life of the Monday/Wednesday/Friday Video Club (MWF)—but also a general condition. Significant amounts of the past four decades of artistic production are trapped on obsolete storage media (from U-Matic tapes to floppy disks). For many artists, the cost of digitization and recovery of this obsolete media is prohibitive. Museums and other art institutions are also faced with tough choices around preservation: which artworks to prioritize, and even more urgent, perhaps, how to ensure that works by less- or not-known artists don't continue to disappear with the format that they live on. In other words: how to preserve the possibility of discovering works, especially those contained in obsolete formats, that are not already written into versions of the canon?

"XFR STN," an Education Department project and exhibition spanning eight weeks and housed in the New Museum's Fifth Floor gallery, will be a fully functioning lab with three transfer stations (two dedicated to moving image formats and one to born-digital materials). Trained technicians will work during Museum hours to digitize materials from three repositories: MWF's cache of tapes, the New Museum's rich institutional archives, and the public's holdings of their own art-associated production. This third category—which acknowledges the breadth and depth of the artistic community in New York—will produce an archive at once chance-driven and yet, we suspect, revelatory. In a sense, "XFR STN" might be described as looking closely at recent history in order to negotiate the present, perhaps even the future.

While cognizant that this is an exhibition that necessarily assesses technological shifts over the last forty years—to say nothing of giving a glimpse of the art world during that time—the project is unabashedly educational. "XFR STN" begins at the New Museum but its success will hinge on whether and how it initiates conversations that open up further and elsewhere. Emphasizing the exchanges that will happen around materials as they are transferred (producing, in the process, new data of many kinds), "XFR STN" enables questions beyond the immediate tasks at hand. Indeed, beginning from the early days of planning the project, everyone involved felt it necessary to call upon friends and colleagues to help tease out the many complexities—philosophical, technical, and artistic— that began to emerge. We are, as visitors to and participants in the project, called to reflect on what it means to engage in producing more content, even while simultaneously retrieving something from the past. On a conceptual level, these are questions that address a cultural climate that would seem hardly lacking in freely circulating images and information. On a practical level, these are questions that necessarily ask us to re-evaluate practices and principles of production as artists and protection as institutions.

2 WHY THE INTERNET ARCHIVE?

The act of digitization or data recovery itself is not preservation, but only the first step in a responsible plan. Once an artist's work has been recovered from obsolete media—be it a VHS cassette or a 5.25-inch floppy disk—these bits must now be inscribed on a new storage medium. The spinning disk of a hard drive is a tenuous and temporary data carrier. If artists left "XFR STN" with nothing more than their recovered materials stored on a portable hard drive, we would truly be doing them a disservice. We would fail to meet digital preservation best practices by storing culturally and personally valuable content on an unstable carrier, and not providing any sort of redundancy or duplication. However, it would not be feasible or sustainable over the long-term for the New Museum to take on the responsibility of storing the terabytes of data that will be produced as a result of "XFR STN." As a solution, the New Museum has partnered with the Internet Archive to make all materials recovered as part of the exhibition available to the public. Subscribing to the dictum that Lots of Copies Keeps Stuff Safe,[1] we embrace the notion that distribution itself is a preservation strategy.

The Internet Archive is a nonprofit institution whose mission is "free and open access to the entire world's knowledge," and whose purposes provide permanent access for researchers, historians, scholars, people with disabilities, and the general public to historical collections that exist in digital format. It is a veritable Noah's Ark for digital and digitized cultural heritage. The Internet Archive's storage infrastructure is both vast and stable, and there is no other such "no questions asked" preservation-minded institution that embraces the unbiased collection, storage, and preservation of cultural heritage ephemera. By partnering with the Internet Archive, we are placing digitized artist materials in a massive data center whose primary mandate is preservation, access, and distribution unencumbered by commercial models. The New Museum will be sharing all uncompressed preservation masters produced during "XFR STN" with the Internet

Archive. The Internet Archive will not only provide permanent public download of these preservation masters, but will additionally transcode and provide streaming access to all materials. Videos can easily and always be streamed on the Internet Archive's website, archive.org. By partnering with the Internet Archive, we propose a strategy that offers not only a stable home for these at-risk materials, but an effective distribution platform.

In sum, we find this open sharing and partnership with the Internet Archive to be the most effective means of mitigating the very real challenge of providing long-term or archival digital storage to massive quantities of material that, outside the context of "XFR STN," may not find their way to collecting institutions before degrading entirely.

3 WHY THE NEW MUSEUM?

"The New Museum of Contemporary Art was founded on the premise that works of art are not only objects for visual delectation and assessment, but are repositories for ideas that reverberate in the larger context of our culture."
—Brian Wallis, New Museum Curator, 1984[2]

Founded in 1977, the New Museum was conceived as a center for exhibitions, information, and documentation about living artists from around the world. As the only major New York City museum dedicated to contemporary art, the idea was always a contentious one. Questioning the standards of tradition, permanence, and connoisseurship generally associated with museum collections, the New Museum's stated mission was "to provide a forum for contemporary art, especially work that has received little or no public exposure or critical attention, or that might otherwise be inaccessible to a broad-based audience; to share new issues that are constantly raised in current artistic inquiry; and to challenge the context of historical precedent and museum practice."[3] This early mission aimed to support recent art made by less established artists through exhibitions, events, interpretation, and documentation.

One of the most radical innovations was the Museum's approach to collecting. In 1978, the New Museum initiated a "Semi-Permanent" collection policy that allowed the Museum to critically examine and deaccession works from its collection after ten years to make room for new additions—though the idea was never successfully implemented. In 1995, the initial collection policy was revisited and re-evaluated in the exhibition "Temporarily Possessed: The Semi-Permanent Collection." Seventeen years after the concept of a semi-permanent collection was introduced, the exhibition's organizers recognized, "If contemporary art making is often formulated in radical opposition to tradition, lack of access to the past also places limits on the meaning of the present."[4] The semipermanent collection policy was officially frozen in 1997. Over the years, the Museum's approach to history and collecting has considered how its own institutional past might inform its current program.

Containing documentation of ideas in the form of images, text, audio, and other media culled from the New Museum's rich history of public programs, the New Museum's Digital Archive is particularly concerned with providing evidence of "ephemeral" events and time-based practices that resist traditional modes of documentation. At the same time, the Digital Archive, with its apparently "immaterial" nature, is anchored within the material reality of boxes, folders, videocassettes, cloud storage linked to data centers, and other new and old technology. The common characterization of digital archives as "immaterial" frames them in opposition to the analog. Resisting this limited dualism of old/new, analog/digital, closed/open, we might instead conceive of the New Museum's Digital Archive as aiming to expand the reach of "traditional" cultural objects, by increasing their preservation, reproduction, distribution, and use.

In the catalogue for "Temporarily Possessed," New Museum curator Alice Yang posited, "How does one maintain the forward trajectory towards innovation without rendering an absolute rupture between the old and the new and losing sight of the histories that contextualize recent developments?"[5] Today we ask: How do we represent and activate the Museum's history in light of its present? How do we remobilize or criticize particular histories? As the archive is made available online, questions remain regarding how the archive itself may be reinterpreted in a contemporary context. How do we make decisions about what to make available online? How do we address the distinctive features of such different forms of access?

These are questions we attempt to face head-on with the intricacies of a project like "XFR STN."

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[2] Brian Wallis, "Introduction," eds., Brian Wallis and Marcia Tucker, *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), vii.
[3] Terrie Sultan, ed., "Statement of Purpose," in *The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York: Eleventh Anniversary* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1988), 6.
[4] Brian Goldfarb and Mimi Young, eds., *Temporarily Possessed: the Semi-Permanent Collection: September 15-December 17, 1995* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995), 26.
[5] Brian Goldfarb and Mimi Young, eds., *Temporarily Possessed: the Semi-Permanent Collection: September 15-December 17, 1995* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995), 155.

[1] A phrase formalized by the Stanford University Library LOCKSS project: lockss.org/about/history